

Reclaimed Trust

Book One
Screams Fall Silent in the Desert
B.A. Erickson

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Dedication

Beth Ann Erickson

This one's for my folks. Mom and Dad, you never gave up on me. You always encouraged me and never let me stop sending out those queries. You did everything you could to make sure hope didn't die. You've put up with this dreamer for many years. And all I can say is "Thanks."

For Maury: You keep me grounded. When I'm deep in my stories, you pull me back to earth and make sure I experience life. I'm lucky to have you in my life.

To my Gogi Monster: You're my inspiration. I think you've taught me more than I've taught you. Always remember, who's my sunshine? Who makes me happy? Who's the luckiest mom in the world? Why?

Sharon, Penny, and Janet: I don't believe anybody has a cheering section like you three. The healer, the nurturer, and the educator – you're three gifted women who make the world a better place.

Adversity with his pick
mines the heart, but he is a cunning
workman. He hollows out new chambers
of joy to abide in, when he is gone.
-Author Unknown

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You'll receive my eternal gratitude if you recommend this book to all your romantic-adventure loving friends. I appreciate your helping spread the word. :)

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Book I

Zadok Awakens

Horab – The Middle East – 2000

Chapter 1

The sound cut through her psyche all morning. That pitiful cry. Piercing the air, frantic and frightened, carried into her quarters by the hot wind. No matter how she tried to push it from her attention, every wail pierced her mind. Every time she walked past her window, she couldn't help but steal a glance. A kitten.

It struggled, tangled in vines next to an olive tree just outside a fence surrounding the compound. Its pitiful moans weakened as the morning progressed.

"Why won't somebody help that poor creature," she whispered, gazing through her window.

The kitten lay on its side, chest heaving. The shade from the tree crept away from the little mass of fur and it wouldn't be long until the sun would beat its fiery fists on the tiny body. But it was the wind that seemed to torture it the most. It was like the breath of Satan blasting burning sand on the defenseless kitten.

"Somebody's gotta help that thing," she mourned aloud.

"Don't do it, Ms Andrews."

Turning, she faced the maid assigned to her for this visit.

"Don't do it," the maid continued, "The Queen has strict orders that no one leaves the mansion."

"But it's just a kitten," she glanced towards the window.

"Stay inside." The servant shook her head, "It's dangerous."

She leaned on the windowsill to better observe the sad sight. The kitten wheezed, struggling for oxygen devoid of debris. Grains of sand lodged everywhere, matting its hair, clogging its ears, and lodging within the damp corners of its eyes. The kitten mourned aloud. It was obvious to Ms Andrews that it would soon become too exhausted to fight the forces of nature.

Her laptop beeped – battery needed re-charging. Damn thing. She turned her attention back to the kitten.

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What harm could come from slipping outside for just a moment to help the little creature? She had to do something. "Fine," she stated, "I'll stay up here and watch it die."

"He'll be fine. You wouldn't believe how hardy those feral cats can be," said the maid, "Besides, it would be a greater tragedy if you were harmed. It's not often someone of your stature comes to our small country." The computer beeped again. The servant glanced towards the laptop as she continued, "The King has insured your safety while you're with us. Stay in your room and forget the cat."

"A person of my stature," she chuckled to herself, "They must not get many visitors..." She gazed out the window. "Fine," she sighed, "I'll stay put. Now I'd appreciate if you'd leave me a while. I've found this incessant meowing to be tiring." She turned from the horrible sight and wandered to her desk. She paused briefly then touched the power button on her computer. It beeped once before the screen turned black.

"If there's anything I can do, let me know," the servant said as she padded from the room.

She placed the laptop in her suitcase, laid down, and closed her eyes. "I won't allow that cat to die," she mused. "The people in this country obviously don't value animal life, but I do."

She decided to close her eyes and wait until the servant was convinced she was sleeping. Then the maid would hopefully leave to do some of her other duties. Then, she'd slip out of her room, down the hall and towards the servant's entrance. Then she'd help the kitten.

She closed her eyes and waited. She listened to the maid outside her bedroom door chatting with someone. "*God, when will she quit?*" she thought as the kitten's cries weakened. Finally, the servant crept into the bedchamber. She tiptoed to the bed and paused. She leaned over and examined Ms Andrews. Her breathing seemed strong and regular. The maid touched her. No reaction. After scanning the bedroom, she scampered out of the room.

With the servant gone, Ms Andrews sprinted out of the bed chamber, sneaking down the hall and slipped outside. She dived behind a shrub and took a moment to catch her breath. She paused to check her surroundings. She didn't notice anything unusual. She focused her eyes on her target.

The kitten laid just beyond a metal structure – probably a storage shed – and the iron fence. If she were to creep past the metal structure, she could easily squeeze between two of the fence bars and untangle the kitten. Then she'd scoop it into her arms and scrunch back to safety.

"Should only take a few minutes," she thought, scanning the area. She didn't see anything unusual. Sand pelted her eyes making tears roll down her cheeks. She imagined how awful the cat felt as she squinted at it. Her gaze shifted to the left, then the right. Still, nothing out of the ordinary. She breathed deep to strengthen her resolve. It should be easy.

She rose to her feet and planned her path. She counted to three, then sprinted to the metal building. She squatted and glanced around. Still nothing unusual. Her movement hadn't aroused the attention of any guards. She wondered where the parameter guard was. She scanned the area until a movement caught her eye. She saw the guard entering the fortress with someone she recognized. Her maid. She smiled.

She popped to her feet, crouching as she sprinted to the fence. She paused, wind whipping her hair into a whirlwind before breathing deep and squeezing between two of the metal rails. It was a tighter fit than she anticipated. "Shit, gotta lose weight," she mumbled, pushing her torso through what now felt like the eye of a needle.

Pulling her rib cage between the rails, she snagged her silk blouse, losing two buttons in the process. "Damn," she mumbled, "hope I can get back through again." She pried her way through, then sat on the other side of the fence, leaning against it for a moment. She smiled, feeling smug, as she reached to scratch the kitten's ear.

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“C’mon little fella,” she murmured, “Let’s get you out of here.”

The moment her hand touched the cat, a hand flew out from under the sand and grabbed her wrist. She gasped and tried to shout for help, but another hand flew from beneath the sand and pulled her head to the ground with a thud. Blinded and groping for a way of escape, more hands grabbed her ankles and flailing arm. Somebody gagged her mouth and threw a long burlap bag over her head, shoulders, reaching all the way to her knees. Then they hoisted her, carrying her like a roll of carpet, and scurried away from the kitten who still lay meowing, complaining, tangled in the vines behind her. Within moments, any evidence of her attempted rescue was blown away by the harsh wind.

She heard labored breathing as she was carried away. She jerked furiously until someone cuffed her alongside the head. Still, she didn’t give up.

Finally, they paused and chattered in a language she didn’t understand. She felt ropes entwine her arms tight against her body. Then she felt herself get tossed onto a large creature. It felt like it could be a horse. Lying on her belly, with her arms bound tight to her waist, she lay draped over this horse-type creature knowing that if she were to wiggle too much, she could tumble onto her head. Her mind swam trying to comprehend what had just happened.

Muffled voices babbled. Finally the animal stomped the ground and whinnied. Someone mounted the animal and placed their hand on her backside. Anger ripped through her body. She struggled in protest but he only chuckled, squeezed her buttock. He spurred the horse, jerking it ahead and bouncing her. She figured she’d eventually fall off the creature and die. After an hour or so of bouncing like a rag doll, she actually felt rather thankful for that firm hand on her butt.

They galloped at break neck speed for what seemed like an eternity. Nausea crept through her body as black

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inkiness swirled through her mind. She felt her glasses dig into the bridge of her nose. The sound of meowing echoed through her ears. Sand gritted between her teeth. The words, "*God, why didn't I listen to the maid,*" echoed through her mind just before she passed out.

She opened her eyes and found herself back in the States, arguing with her editor.

"Warren, I can't make that change in Chapter 2. It's one of the best supports for my theme." She hated when he wanted to make major changes in her manuscripts.

"Your theme is too complicated. Nobody wants to read anything that confusing. Lighten it up," he sipped his cappuccino.

"How am I supposed to do that? All the research indicates that..." she adjusted her blazer preparing to go into one of her well-prepared speeches that effectively castrated any male within hearing distance. He crossed his legs and interrupted.

"The average reader is unimpressed with 'all that research.' Go out and get some real life experience. You've spent so much time in that god-damned lab with those god-damned scientists testing god-damned theories that I think you've forgotten what it's like out here in the real world. If you want to write about the life and politics of Horab, then go there and experience it. I've had it with all these theories. I've had it up to here," his index finger cut an imaginary line across his throat, "with those intellectual egg-heads you've befriended."

Warren Bessman had been Penny Andrew's editor for well over a decade. The way he figured, what had started as a brilliant career was now fast evolving into mediocrity. He'd watched her abandon her dreams. He'd seen her begin to fear the real world and had watched her embrace the sterile existence of labs and theories. Penny used to be one of his best writers. Now her work was dry, lifeless, completely without imagination. He uncrossed his legs.

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"I can't go to Horab," she retorted, "It's too dangerous. You know that peace in the Middle East is touch-and-go. Travelers are discouraged from going there. I don't know a single travel agent who'll recommend a visit to Horab or anywhere near there for that matter."

"Life is dangerous," he shrugged, "maybe some exotic travel will ignite passion in you. I've read the manuscript. I think you've become too subjective living in your safe little world. You need to get out and experience life. I'm not going to publish this piece of shit until you've made major revisions to it." He flung the manuscript into the trashcan. Leaning forward, he thrust his face into hers, "Get your sorry ass to Horab and talk to the monarchy. Share meals with the people. Then come back and finish your book. No scientific theories. This time I want a people focus rather than a thesis focus. Got it?"

"Got it," she sighed. Larry wouldn't like this at all.

"Let's have some enthusiasm," he said.

"Yeah, Warren. Why not be enthused? My fiancée is gonna love hearing I'm off to the 'Powder Keg of the World' so I can get 'life experience.'"

"My secretary will handle the arrangements. Just give her the dates. They better be soon 'cause I've got a deadline. If you miss it, we'll have to re-think our relationship." He sighed. She had talent. She just needed to find it. He softened. "Look, you're a brilliant writer but you're not a researcher. All this research crap has affected your true calling – writing from your heart." He said, "Maybe you need a vacation. Some time alone. Away from Larry. If you want to formally extend the deadline, I may consider it. But I want you out of here. If nothing else, you'll get some sort of vacation in Horab."

"Warren, you know the final draft will be great, it always is. But do I really have to go to Horab? I can interview Horab-Americans, I can read first hand accounts, I can..."

He glared at her.

"I'll set it up," she responded.

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One week later she was on the plane. She could still see Larry's scowling face as she boarded the flight. But if she were to finish her book, she needed to do what Warren wanted.

Besides, it almost felt good to get away from everyone. She smiled. She'd not only visit Horab, but the Horab's King Johosaphat Jihad, had offered to be her host. She'd see and do things no writer had ever done before. She was almost excited to begin her wonderful adventure. She gazed out the plane window.

She felt warm, but the air blowing from the vent above her head was cool. She closed her eyes and allowed it to brush against her face. It felt wonderful. She lifted the glass of wine and gazed through the burgundy liquid. She lifted it to her lips. For some reason she was unusually thirsty. She gulped the liquid but it didn't quench her thirst. It tasted sweet, but didn't wet her mouth. She gazed into the glass trying to figure out why she was so incredibly thirsty. Turbulence buffeted the plane causing her to spill the drink.

She spilled a lot. She felt liquid on her face, neck, chest, lap, legs. She shook her head. How did she get so wet? She choked. Her mouth was full of something – something gritty. She gagged, opened her eyes and found herself full of sand. Strangers splashed water on her face.

She tried to leap to her feet but succeed only in falling to her side. Her arms and legs were bound so tight, her fingers and toes throbbed. She pulled the ropes. One of the men, dark and rugged, propped her upright again and ungagged her mouth. She instinctively spat sand on his shirt. Memories of the day's events flooded her mind.

She heard the kitten meowing. She felt the hands on her wrists. She smelled the horse. She heard men laughing and mumbling in that language.

As she struggled to free her hands, the man leaned close to look at her. She took the opportunity to study him too. He looked strange and distorted. His face twisted in curves and angles she'd never seen before. But, he spoke English.

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"Hello, Madam. How may I assist you?" He pulled her glasses from nose, wiped away water droplets and placed them back on her nose. He didn't look so strange anymore. Now he looked almost handsome, for a kidnapper and barbarian, with dark flashing eyes and a broad smile. Anger welled within her stomach. How could he smile after the horrible crime he'd just committed? In her opinion, he should look at least a little ashamed of himself.

"Let me go," she said, sputtering grains of sand from her mouth.

"I can't do that," he stated, brushing sand from his shoulder.

"Why not?" she growled, pulling at the ropes.

"Is there anything else I can do to assist you? He reached to finger her silk shirt, stopping briefly to study the vacant spot where one of the buttons had torn off. She cringed.

"Go to hell!" she snarled, feet flailing as she attempted to kick him. She'd never been a swearer, but today seemed like a good time to start.

He chuckled and turned to the other men. He yelled something in their language. They responded with gales of laughter. Shrugging, he turned away from her and proceeded towards the camp.

Tears of frustration pooled in her eyes. She sat for a moment then surveyed the area. Lush trees and grasses surrounded her. A small lake, maybe a pond, lapped at its shore nearby. She longed to swim in its cool water and take a long drink. Thirst parched her throat and a desert of sand ground between her teeth. More than anything she wanted to forget these men and pretend everything was fine.

She turned to memorize the faces of her abductors. She tried to remember as many details as possible so she'd be able to describe them to police when she got home. They wouldn't get away with this crime.

They all had dark wavy hair. Two had ponytails. A few had mustaches and one, a beard. The leader had laughing brown eyes and straight white teeth. The men periodically

turned to gawk at her. She wondered why no one guarded her closer.

She scooted to the other side of the tree to see what was behind her. Disappointment enveloped her as she realized where she was. Sand completely surrounded them and stretched for as far as she could see. She figured they were probably in Horab. She didn't know exactly where she was but her knowledge of this area confirmed that the desert would continue for hundreds of miles. This, she supposed, was why nobody guarded her. If she ran away, she would probably die from heat exhaustion. If she didn't die from that, the desert animals would surely find her quite tasty. She pulled on the wrist restraints, nonetheless.

Seeing her struggle with the bands, the leader strode to her again.

"Are you ready to settle down?" he spoke in English and acted almost civilized. She glared at him but he simply shook his head and chuckled. "Would you like some food?" he asked, holding a bowl towards her.

Hunger had already dissolved her innards. "No. I'm not hungry," she retorted.

"You need to eat or you'll become ill. Here, let me untie you. I'm sure you won't try to run away, will you?" he touched a revolver strapped to his side. She tried not to react.

He straddled her legs, knelt down and reached around her to untie the bands around her wrists. Suddenly aware of her vulnerability, she turned her head away but became incredibly aware of his muscular shoulder next to her cheekbone.

"Damn, I feel like I'm trapped in a stupid romance novel," she mumbled.

"What?" he leaned back.

"Nothing," she said.

He pulled at her restraints again.

After feeling the welcome relief of the bands loosening, she drew her hands in front of her and comforted her aching wrists. He didn't move. Rather, he bent his knees

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further and straddled her lap. He nonchalantly grasped the bowl again and gazed deep into her eyes, "If you try to run, we'll kill you. You don't know where you are and there's no one here to help you. We will reach our destination within two days." Then he smiled, gaze slipping to her breasts, "Tonight you will be with me."

She cringed at the connotation of the sentence. She gritted her teeth and pushed the bowl into his chest. Hot, brown liquid stained his shirt and crept towards the waistband of his pants. Angry fire shot through his eyes.

"Now," he continued, scooping black sludge from his shirt back into the bowl, "since you're our guest, what are you called?"

"What do you mean," she replied careful not to make him madder. She made a mental note not to irritate him further.

"What is your name?" His lips smiled, but his eyes seethed. She knew she'd better cooperate a little and give him enough information to placate him.

"Penny," she blurted.

He furrowed his brows. "Penny?" he repeated.

"My name is Penny," she answered, grateful to see his anger subside a little. Then she added, "What's yours?"

"My what?"

"Name."

"It's none of your business," he answered, "But if you have to know, it's Benjamin."

"Benjamin," she repeated.

He nodded. "Well, Penny," he said, setting the bowl on the ground, "you have the name of an American coin." She nodded, not speaking as he continued, "Well, it seems you were in the wrong place at the right time. You aren't exactly what we expected to find outside King Jihad's fortress, but you'll have to do for now. Tomorrow we'll decide what to do with you."

"What do you mean by, you'll 'decide' what to do with me?" She deflated.

He studied the woman. She was probably nice to look at, but was definitely a foreigner. Her smooth, ivory skin glistened with perspiration. Straight blond hair lay in strings around her shoulders and she made no attempt to cover her head. He'd never touched blond hair before. It looked like spun gold. He reached to touch it but she recoiled and shoved his hand away. He pulled his attention away from his thoughts and back to the situation at hand.

"Where do you come from?" he asked, his anger replaced with a mild curiosity. Any woman from this area would certainly never push a man away, especially a woman in such a precarious position.

"I'm an American citizen and I demand to know what's going on!" She tried to sound important.

Now it was he who deflated. "*Shit,*" he thought, "*an American. I hate Americans. They're inconvenient. Uncooperative. Full of self-importance. It's going to be impossible to travel with her.*" He sighed, exhaustion creeping into his face. "*Why couldn't she at least be European?*"

He thought intently, trying to think of a way to get rid of this American. "*We went to Horab to get Jihad's Chief of Security and extract his information. Now we may have dragged the United States into this.*" He sighed. "*If the U.S. decides this woman is important, we'll rue the day we set eyes on her. I'd better contact Zadok.*" He spoke.

"You'll find out what's going on tomorrow." He seemed distracted as he continued, "As for now, you need to eat." His eyes finally met hers, "Here's what's going to happen: We'll eat, we'll sleep for three hours and travel tonight when it's cool."

He rose from her lap and watched intently as she scurried to untie her legs. After she stood, he grasped her arm and led her to the group of men. He then re-filled the bowl without bothering to remove the sludge he'd scraped from his shirt. He handed it to her. The contents looked like brown shoe polish.

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"What am I supposed to do with this," she inquired, hoping it wasn't the food.

"Eat it," he said. Then he stepped towards his men.

She sniffed at the contents in the bowl. Then wrinkling her nose she dipped the tip of her index finger in the gelatinous liquid and touched her tongue. It was OK, but like nothing she'd experienced before. Somewhat intrigued, she submerged even more of her finger into the goo and tasted again. This time she didn't like it at all. It not only looked like shoe polish but it also tasted like it. She wrinkled her nose as her stomach rumbled. She needed to eat even if it didn't taste good. She had to maintain her strength if she were to escape from these men. Then she realized something: she had no spoon. She couldn't very well drink out of a bowl. He'd obviously forgotten to give her eating utensils.

She glanced towards the men. They were in the midst of an intense conversation, waving their hands and yelling. She tentatively interrupted them. "Where's my spoon?" she asked.

He ignored her.

She spoke louder, "Excuse me, but where's my spoon?"

She watched Benjamin groan. "Your what?" he barked.

"My spoon."

"Just drink it."

She wrinkled her nose. "I'm not uncivilized. I need a spoon if I'm going to consume soup." Her words grated on his ears.

He rolled his eyes as the men observed the proceedings with amused curiosity. "It's not soup. Just drink so we can go to bed."

Her heart sank. "We? What do you mean by 'we'? I'm not sleeping with you."

"Sit down and eat it or I'll *make* you eat it."

Judging from the look on his face, she knew this was not an idle threat. She didn't want to find out how he planned to "make" her eat. She gingerly moved the bowl to her lips, and sipped some of the concoction. It wasn't as

bad as she thought, but it wasn't very good either. It tasted like a slimy mush made from grain. Meanwhile the mean man spoke intently with the others. She couldn't tell what they were saying, but could tell by the tone of their voices that they were discussing something serious. After choking down about half of the "soup", she placed the bowl on the ground.

He turned and asked, "You done?"

"Yes, thank-you," she endeavored to sound somewhat pleasant.

"Finish it," he demanded then mumbled, "Typical American. They waste everything."

"I'm full," she lied, still famished but unable to stomach any more of the concoction.

"Fine, we better get to bed."

He strolled over to her and yanked her to her feet. She tried to struggle but the look in his eyes made her quit. Some of the other men scattered to small blankets on the ground while others took rifles and stood at what she figured must be some sort of guard posts. One spoke intently on a cellular phone.

After yanking her to a grassy spot, he demanded, "Stay here and don't move."

Penny trembled. She tried to imagine what sort of person would bury themselves under a stranded kitten. Why did they take her? How long had they laid under that sand waiting? She yearned to go home, but had a sinking feeling it would be a long time before she'd step foot on American soil.

She watched as he yanked blankets from a pack on the horse's saddle. He tossed a thicker one on the ground and rolled another like a jellyroll, making something that resembled a pillow. He then snatched another blanket and dropped it beside the "bed." Striding towards her, he grasped her arm and pulled her to the blankets. She landed on her knees.

"I can't sleep on that." She figured she might as well make one last effort to avoid sleeping with that man.

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"Why not," he sighed impatiently.

"It's too itchy. Now, if you had some nice cottons or maybe even silk it would be OK. But this woolly stuff," she gestured dramatically, rolling her eyes. "Wow, I mean I could possibly be allergic to it. And also, the ground seems kind of hard, kinda lumpy too."

"Get down," he demanded.

"I don't think I like your intolerant attitude," she mumbled as she fingered the blankets. He dropped to the ground and pulled her against his chest. With his free hand, he covered both of them with the extra blanket.

Her back rested against him and the warmth of his body radiated into hers. He lay too close.

"So much for 'social distance,'" she thought wryly, remembering her sociology professor's lectures.

He'd said, "Public Distance: It ranges from 12 to 25 feet and requires a loud voice and is illustrated by someone giving a lecture. Social Distance: It ranges from 4 to 7 feet and is the distance for a formal business meeting." Public or social distance would have been far more comfortable for her. She'd easily be able to tolerate these men from that distance. Her professor's lecture continued to ring in her mind, "Personal Distance: It ranges from 18 inches to 4 feet. It's the distance for friendly conversation. And finally, we have Intimate Distance: It ranges from 0 to 18 inches and is illustrated by a couple making love, by a mother nursing an infant and by wrestlers locked in a tight hold." Penny cringed. She lay intimately close to this stranger. She squeezed her eyes shut and prayed this stranger wouldn't force her to engage any further in "intimate distance."

She lay as still possible and listened to the men speak in that strange dialect. She couldn't pick up a word they said. She decided that she would only visit English-speaking countries from then on. She had begun to mentally list these countries when he interrupted her.

"Even though you're the most irritating woman I've ever met, I have to admit you've captured my interest. You're

very soft, my American," his breath brushed her ear while his palm caressed her outer thigh.

Her body tensed.

"I've heard American women are wonderful, passionate lovers. Is this true?" he simmered.

"Leave me alone," she sneered.

"I've never touched such white skin. It's soft."

"Leave me alone or I'll scream." She tried to pull away but he held tight and threw one leg over hers. His hand wandered under her shirt towards her chest.

She struggled, mumbling curses while he caressed and squeezed her right breast. Finally she yanked her left arm free and elbowed him with every bit of strength she could muster. He gasped, letting go of her chest, clutching his ribs. He chuckled. "What the hell are you wearing under that shirt?" White anger shot through her veins. She jabbed him again and again. He laughed, deflecting her flailing elbow. "Settle down," he said, "I'm too tired for a fight right now. Perhaps later. I think we better sleep." His arms encircled her waist and his head lowered to the pillow.

Trembling with anger she lay tense, hands tight against her chin. When his breathing became regular and his grasp around her waist loosened she allowed herself to relax and eventually fell into an uneasy sleep.

She awoke abruptly when a shout pierced the air. The man beside her leaped to his feet, dragging her to her knees.

Hardly awake he yanked her towards the fire at the center of the camp, threw her to the ground near one of the men and spoke sharply. The man grabbed her and dragged her to a tree where he bound her hands and feet. Then he stood over her with his rifle set to fire. Five horses with five riders approached the camp.

Chapter 2

It felt like a never-ending ride. The call he'd received from Nathan disturbed him immensely. After disconnecting, he immediately gathered his most trusted soldiers and rushed to meet his men. Now he could finally see Benjamin and Nathan in the distance and would assess the trouble himself. He rode directly to Benjamin and slid off his horse.

"Thank you for coming, sir. We didn't know what to do with her," Benjamin grasped the bridle and held the stallion. His brows knit together in a worried mass of emotion. His hair, ruffled and flat on one side, made him look as though he'd just awakened.

"I don't suppose it's easy to tell a foreigner from a native. Or a man from a woman while buried in sand," Zadok looked distracted, visibly trying to hide his frustration.

Benjamin dug the butt of his rifle in the sand, "Correct, sir."

"Well, let me see her." Zadok wasn't sure what to expect. Nathan sounded upset on the mobile phone. He said that he thought this woman would be trouble. Zadok usually trusted his assessment of people but hoped he was wrong this time. He couldn't afford any extra trouble.

Benjamin tossed the horse's reins to Nathan and followed as Zadok waded through the tall grass towards Penny. Upon seeing Zadok, the guard immediately lowered his weapon and bowed his head.

Zadok ignored the guard and instead focused on Penny. "So, this is her?" He scrutinized her appearance, "Rather pretty. Looks very American, though," Zadok wrinkled his nose as he spoke in the strange dialect. He scanned her body and studied her face, hoping to find vulnerability, a softness, something that would convince him that she'd be controllable.

Penny, seated on the ground, glared at the two men. She already disliked the new guy. His eyes bore uncomfortably into her but she tried not to flinch. She couldn't let him see any weakness. She had to convince them she wasn't

someone to be messed with. She wouldn't allow these men to turn her into a whimpering female hostage.

Zadok spoke, "What's her name?"

"Penny," replied Benjamin.

"Penny," Zadok repeated, "Hmmm, interesting name, kind of difficult to pronounce. And look at her – ugh."

Her hair was tangled in knots, her glasses sat cock-eyed on her face, and mascara left black trails down her cheeks. She sat seething, clothes rumpled, two buttons torn from her blouse, and one sandal missing. She didn't remember it falling off.

"Benjamin, does she speak our dialect?" Zadok knelt lower to peer at her. He scrutinized her, reminding her of how Larry usually looked when studying a horse before purchasing it.

"Not a word," Benjamin shook his head, "She's not in pleasant spirits, rather opinionated and very unhappy."

Zadok knelt all the way to his haunches. "Hello, Penny," he spoke slowly in English; the same way a kindergarten teacher speaks to his students. "I'm Jonathan Zadok. I'm the leader of these men. I understand there's been a misunderstanding."

Penny glared at him.

He proceeded, carefully straightening her glasses while speaking in slow, even tones. "Well, what's done is done. It's unfortunate that you were taken and not the person we expected. I guess we'll have to live with our mistake," Jonathan shrugged.

Penny's jaw quivered with anger. "When my government finds out what you did, you're in *big* trouble," she sneered, yanking her wrists against the ropes.

"Well, that's what's so incredibly interesting about all this." Zadok leaned back on his heels, eyes hardening, piercing into hers. "My men are professionals. When you went out to rescue the cat, we got you -- not Jihad's Chief of Security. You didn't make a sound, and the cat was left in position. The only evidence of what happened was some rumpled sand, but the wind smoothed it out in a few

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minutes. Actually, nobody knows where you are and nobody knows you've been abducted unless we choose to tell them." His eyes grew harder. "As far as anybody knows, you just wandered off into the desert, got lost, and will never return. Reality is, we've got you and we're not sure what we're going to do with you."

Penny tried not to react to his words, but the lone tear that coursed its way down her cheek betrayed her emotions.

Jonathan continued, "Are you going to cooperate until we get back to camp or shall I kill you now?"

His eyes dug into hers, invading her mind. She wanted to look away but his gaze held her tight.

"When will I learn to listen?" she thought. *"I should have listened to the maid. My life is probably ruined because I couldn't listen."* She sighed, trying to keep fear from overwhelming her. *"What am I going to do? I've gotta get out of here. Do I try to fight back?"* She glanced to her right. Men – big men – trudged through the camp. *"I can't fight all these guys. They look like a bunch of behemoths. And they can make my life miserable. Should I cooperate?"* She gazed into the eyes of Zadok. He truly frightened her.

But how could she make herself cooperate? Her chin quivered. How could she have been thrust in such a horrible situation? She came to Horab to study the people. Study their traditions and culture. Now she had to cooperate with these barbarians. But how? She sighed. Her breath blew Zadok's hair making it rustle against his cheek. She examined him closer. He was the scariest person she'd ever met. Now he made her choose life or death. Not much of a choice. A horrible life – or death.

Then a thought emerged. Maybe she could cooperate just long enough to find a chance to escape. She'd have to encounter an opportunity sooner or later. She choked on her words. "I'll cooperate."

Jonathan watched the lie pass through her lips. This woman was as transparent as glass. He smiled nonetheless as he unfolded his body to stand. "Very good. I'm famished.

I'm going to eat something." He smiled, "Meanwhile, why don't you clean yourself, maybe take a bath. You look terrible. I can't sleep with a mess like that." He turned to Benjamin. "Get her something more appropriate to wear. She can't travel in that outfit." He gestured towards what was left of her beautiful silk blouse and khaki shorts.

Benjamin bowed, "As you wish."

Jonathan Zadok strode to the campfire and Benjamin turned to Penny. So, she'd be with Zadok. He untied her hands. However, rather than straddling her legs, he slid behind her when he undid the ropes. She scrambled to fumble with the leg bands. When she'd barely finished, he grasped her arm, yanked her to her feet, and led her to the camp. When he dropped her arm, he said, "Stand still," as he circled and examined her body.

"What are you looking at?" Penny stammered.

"I need to know what size will fit," he stated, scrutinizing her.

His gaze rested for a moment on the gentle curves of her breasts before he smiled and yelled something in his own dialect.

"Hey Nathan, you're kinda small. Got any extra traveling clothes?"

"Yeah."

"Get 'um for the American princess."

Nathan jumped to his feet, dug through his saddlebag, and snatched a long shirt and pants. He tossed them to Benjamin. Benjamin grabbed his own saddlebag and led Penny down to the oasis pond.

"Get undressed and take a bath," he demanded in English.

Penny froze, "I don't think so."

"You can do so voluntarily or I'll be glad to assist," he smiled, stepping towards her. "I wouldn't mind touching you again."

"Get away from me. We have laws against stuff like this," she sneered.

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"You're not in America," he laughed, "In this country, a woman – especially an uncooperative one – will fetch about the same price as a dog. I could use you like a rag then throw you away. No one would know the difference." He stepped closer, "Now, are you going to bathe or am I going to assist you?"

She stared at him for a few moments. When he stepped towards her again, she stated, "Turn around." She struggled to contain her disgust.

"What?" His brows furrowed.

"Turn around and I'll get undressed," she said.

"No," he replied.

She spoke slowly, "You've already made it clear I can't survive alone in the desert. You've also graphically explained my rank in your country. I assure you, I have no plans to run away. I also have *no* intentions of undressing in front of you. I'll take a bath, but I *must* have some privacy to do so. Do you have any problems with that?" Her eyes bore into him.

"Uh, I guess not," he studied her face. He hadn't encountered anyone like her before. He added, "Just don't try anything or you're dead. Got it? I'll stand here and you can undress behind those bushes over there." He pointed to his right. "I'm going to watch, though. I'm not about to let you embarrass me by trying something stupid on my watch."

"Fine." She glided over to the shrubs and turned to see if he was watching. He was. "He's certainly no gentleman," she mumbled under her breath. She carefully removed the beautiful silk blouse. It was wrinkled and torn beyond repair. The silk itself, so stressed and rubbed with wear, would never be as beautiful as it was the first time she saw it in the store window. However, her blouse was the least of her worries. She glanced towards Benjamin – he still watched. She undid her pants and removed her only sandal. She gingerly placed her glasses on top of the clothing. She did not remove her bra and panties. She turned once more to see if Benjamin watched. He did.

She said, "Turn around so I can get in the water."

He turned, surprised at his feelings of embarrassment. He felt like an intruder. Nevertheless, he overcame the sensation and peeked towards her again. He caught a glimpse of her almost-naked body as she dived under the water. What strange under clothes. The women he'd been with never wore anything like that. A glossy rose print filled the glistening undergarments.

She swam effortlessly. Her white arms cut through the water as she slid from one side of the pond to the other, barely causing a ripple in the glassy surface. Benjamin rubbed his head, struck by the strange fascination he felt towards this American woman; he became hypnotized by the rhythmic motion of her swimming back and forth. He frantically searched for a reason to speak to her again. To hear her voice, or even, maybe get a better look at that underclothing she wore. He imagined water glistening on her milky shoulders and small rivers coursing between her breasts. How could he capture her attention? Then he remembered the soap.

"Hey," he called out, "Here's some soap." She didn't stop. He added, "to clean yourself."

She barely paused before she altered her course to swim towards him. She stopped about ten feet from the shore and held out her hand. The skin on her outstretched arm, so clear, so translucent, it seemed to glow. She looked almost pleasant with the mascara removed from under her eyes and her cheeks glowing from the cool water's tender bite. He gazed at the thin floral straps of her bra.

"Are you going to give it to me?" she snapped.

"Oh yeah." He hastily tossed her the soap. She snatched it with a grunt of disdain. Damn, he'd irritated her again. But given enough time he felt certain he could win her heart. *Maybe Zadok will let me have her.*

She dove under the water and cut to the other side of the pond. She kept her back to him as she removed the strange attire she wore. She washed it thoroughly and then placed it back over her torso. He strained his eyes to

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capture a glimpse of her. Damn. The sun burned his eyes and obscured what had to be a magnificent view. She performed the same washing ritual with the tiny pantaloons she wore. Then she washed her hair. Obviously finished, she swam towards him.

However, after she reached his side of the pond, rather than exiting the water, she paused, tossed the soap to him with a quick "I'm done. Thanks." Then, she sped to the other side, resuming her laps.

"Ungrateful wench," he thought as he scraped sand off his only bar of soap, now over half used.

She swam back and forth until her limbs ached. She stopped to rub her sore calves. "*Major stubble,*" she thought wryly, "*I really need to shave my legs.*" She sighed.

The water felt so cool, so luscious, she didn't allow herself to think about the gravity of her situation. She closed her eyes and imagined herself back home swimming laps at the local junior high school swimming pool. Back and forth she went. Every time fear crept into her consciousness, she repeated: "I'm an American. I know my country will get me out of this. I'm an American. I know my country will get me out of this. I'm an American..." A voice broke into her thoughts.

"Penny, it's time."

It was Benjamin. She ignored him and swam with all her energy back and forth at the far end of the pond. If she acknowledged him, she'd acknowledge her situation. If she acknowledged her situation, it would be real. If she ignored him long enough, maybe he'd go away. Then she could be rescued by King Jihad. But he spoke again.

"Penny, come on." This time impatience tinged each word. He paced the waters edge.

"I didn't hear that," she thought wryly, using every muscle to pull her body through the water, still imagining being back at the school, still trying to forget where she really was.

"HEY, let's go!" Benjamin called. Zadok was waiting for her, and Benjamin knew Zadok didn't like to wait.

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She began to gain speed. Lightening shot through her limbs, making them numb one moment and quiver with pain the next. Yet she continued. She swam her laps a few more times and didn't hear any more of Benjamin's irritating whining.

She relaxed her stroke allowing her limbs to quiet their screams of pain. She figured Benjamin had given up and would leave her alone – hopefully for a long while. She slowed her strokes further.

Without warning, she felt something grab her leg from beneath the water. Memories of her abduction filled her mind. Horrifying visions of hands popping up from the sand and grasping her arms invaded her consciousnesses. She shrieked. Before she could calculate her next move, anger filled her belly and she began to kick. She'd never be a passive victim again. She felt herself being yanked under the water. She clawed like a mountain lion.

She scratched and bit – savagely attacked – whatever it was that grabbed her. Finally it released its grip. She burst through the surface of the water only to be met by Benjamin splattering water next to her. Time seemed to stand still as she stared straight into his indignant eyes. Pure anger welled within her. She slapped him. "Don't EVER do that to me."

"It's time to go," he stated rubbing his face.

"Fine," she snorted, "all you had to do was ask." She glared at him half expecting some sort of chauvinistic banter but got none. Without saying another word, she swam towards the opposite shore. Benjamin kept pace beside her keeping perfect rhythm.

She stopped just shy of the shore, bringing him to an abrupt stop as well.

"You need to turn around," she didn't even glance at him as she spoke.

"I've got a towel and clean clothes right over there," he said pointing to his saddlebag.

"Get out and leave them by the bush. Then I'll get dressed," she replied.

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"Fine," he mumbled.

He hauled himself, fully clothed, from the water and dripped all the way to his saddlebag. He grabbed Nathan's clothes and a small towel, walked to the bush, and placed the pile of fabric on it. He plodded and squished back to his spot until finally plopping on a stone next to his saddlebag, pools of water forming at his feet.

"Go ahead, I'm not looking," he said.

Penny stepped from the water and scampered to the bush. Upon hearing her footsteps, Benjamin turned to catch a glimpse of her. He couldn't help but notice her long tapering legs and flat stomach. She wasn't nearly as homely as he'd first thought. He began to salivate as he watched the flashes of white flesh as she dried with the tiny towel and slipped into Nathan's clothing. Even through the bushes, Benjamin recognized how the large the clothes would easily hide the body he so wanted to explore. Only he knew the true extent of the treasures the baggy attire hid.

The clothes felt itchy. The woolly fabric seemed to be made of the same fibers as the blankets. The shirt felt like a poncho. She'd need a belt to keep the pants from falling to her ankles. Although her American clothes were ruined, she folded them and carried them to Benjamin. She handed him the wet towel and stated in her most business-like voice, "I want to keep my blouse and pants. I'll also need shoes since you lost one of my sandals. Do you have a comb so I can do something with my hair?"

She spoke with such authority that Benjamin actually jumped to obey her orders. His actions surprised himself.

He dug in his bag. "Here's a comb, I'll take care of your old clothes, and I'll see if any of the men have extra shoes. How's that?" He couldn't believe he spoke to her like that. Damn, now he was acting like her servant – and she was supposed to be his hostage.

"Fine." She turned on her heel and walked back to her bush. She lowered her body to the ground and proceeded to pull the comb through her hair. She wondered how it would dry without conditioner. It would probably look like a pile of

straw but she didn't care. She needed to concentrate on finding a way to escape.

She finished her grooming, but couldn't bear to see Benjamin or his henchmen again. She pretended to primp her hair while evaluating her situation.

It was true. She had no idea where she was. She didn't know where she was going. She didn't know who these people were or what dialect they spoke.

"My editor told me to live life, but I don't suppose Warren meant I should live it this much," she pondered. She tried to hold back the tears that kept filling her eyes. What was Warren going to do when she didn't submit her book? What was he going to do if she never returned? What about her fiancée and her life in the States? Things looked bad.

A tear rolled down her cheek and landed on her leg.

"Are you ready?"

She discreetly dried her face, rearranged her glasses and looked up. It was Benjamin.

"Yeah," she rose to her feet, nonverbally declining any assistance from him as he extended his hand to help her.

"When you see Zadok, don't smart-mouth him. Just smile and be nice. Then he probably won't kill you. If you can convince him that you can be useful... you know, be nice. Real cordial. Maybe he'll spare your life. Understand?" Benjamin looked uncharacteristically sincere.

"Yeah, fine," she mumbled. She had no intentions of being nice or cordial to that animal.

They walked, with him grasping her arm, towards Jonathan Zadok.

Chapter 3

Jonathan Zadok leaned on a pillow near his fire, wondering what this American would be like. He hoped he wouldn't have to kill her – he hated killing women – especially women who were blameless pawns in a larger struggle for dominance. He wondered what was taking Benjamin and Penny so long.

Jonathan Zadok was a handsome man with jet-black hair and intelligent brown eyes. He seemed taller than he actually was because he held such a commanding presence. He smiled seeing Penny and Benjamin finally approach. He stood to greet them.

"Hello my American hostage," He scrutinized her again. She looked different. She seemed smaller and less American. Must be the clothes. He glanced at Benjamin, raising his eyebrows wondering why he was so wet. Benjamin just shook his head as if to say, "Don't ask." Jonathan didn't.

"Hello," Penny replied, "my barbarian captor."

Zadok laughed aloud. She sounded as sassy as Benjamin had described. "Tell me about yourself." He smiled, almost sneered, immediately beginning his work of intimidation. He looked at her as if he were a former lover and already knew her intimately. His eyes taunted her. She squirmed. Success! He smiled.

She strengthened her resolve and lifted her eyes to his, "What do you want to know," she pulled her thoughts together, deciding she wouldn't let him intimidate her. He wouldn't respect a woman who squirmed under his gaze. She needed his respect if she were to convince him she deserved her freedom.

He watched her straighten her spine. As he studied her liquid blue eyes, he couldn't help but notice what a lovely creature she was. Her damp hair glistened by the firelight and the over-sized clothes emphasized her long neck. His eyes followed the magnificent bone structure of her clavicle.

What should he do next? She was unlike anybody he'd met before. She appeared to be tough to scare into submission.

"Your name is 'Penny'," he said, eyes focused on her face.

"Yes," she braced herself against his gaze.

"And, you're an American," his dark eyes bore deeper into her. She squirmed again.

"Yes, we've established the fact that I'm an American." She stated with a note of impatience. She breathed deep. Instinct combined with education told her that she had to establish her sense of "humanness" in his eyes. If she could make him realize she was a human being – someone with a home, a life, friends, – he'd treat her better than if she were a mere woman or a sub-human from a far away land. She continued, "I was wondering, uh," she stammered, "When do you suppose I can go home? Back to Minnesota. To my family. My pets?" She verbally clawed at words, trying to draw her family life into the conversation.

"Go home?" his eyes darkened as he chuckled, "you just got here." She deflated as he continued, "You can't go back to the States. Your government mustn't find out about our misunderstanding and penalize our nation for this small mistake. No, you'll not be going back any time soon." His eyes traveled down her body, "But I'm sure we'll enjoy getting to know each other." He motioned for Benjamin to leave.

Penny turned away from those disconcerting eyes just in time to see Benjamin's back as he walked to join the other men, leaving her alone with Jonathan. Fear swelled within her. Suddenly a night spent with Benjamin didn't seem horrible anymore. She turned to face the man called Zadok. She felt alone.

"If you cooperate, your visit with us will be nice, maybe even pleasant," he said, "but as I said before, if you don't, I won't hesitate to kill you and bury your body somewhere out here," he made a sweeping gesture with his arm towards the desert. "Of course, you'll never be found -- except by the night creatures who scrounge for food..."

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Those eyes told her he wasn't kidding.

She couldn't let him know how frightened she felt at that moment. She decided to change the subject. "Fine, I already said I'd cooperate," she mumbled, clenching her pants, "But before we make any plans, I'll need a belt to hold these up." She smiled and chuckled lamely, hoping her feeble attempt at light conversation would soften his attitude. "God," she thought, *"I am in SO much trouble. I've really screwed up this time, I have to get outta here..."*

He returned her smile, looking more like a leer than a smile. He sneered, "Sit down," he patted the pillows next to him, "and eat a good dinner, I hear you didn't eat much before. Afterwards we'll find something to do with those pants."

Everything within her screamed to run, but she knew that now was not the time. She reluctantly stepped to the small pillow next to him and lowered herself to the utmost corner. He reached into his saddlebag and pulled out what looked like dried meat and fruit. At last, some recognizable foods.

"Now, what are we going to do with you?" he asked while handing her some jerky, not giving her a chance to answer, "I've been thinking this over and I think we've got a few options. We need to decide on one." Penny cringed. She could tell by his voice that she wasn't one of the "we" who would decide her fate. "Let's see," he continued, "we can sell you and you can become a servant -- you might be worth some cash to us." A knot formed in her throat. He continued, "Actually, I don't need any money so I don't need to consider that option," he sighed.

"I suppose I can keep you and you'll be *my* servant," his eyes narrowed as he smiled slyly, "But you don't look like a good worker." He grasped her hand and traced his finger along her palm, "I doubt if you've performed a decent day's work in your life. Nope, you can't be one of my servants." She yanked her hand away. Then he laughed, "Maybe you can be somebody's mistress. You look well suited for that task," his eyes teased her viciously. She turned away as he

continued, "Or somebody could be crazy enough to marry you. Hmmmm, what should we do? Which option sounds the most agreeable?"

"How could anybody respond to such a list of so-called 'options?'" she blurted. She breathed deep, trying not to betray her rage. "Mr. Zadok," she croaked, "if your intent is to scare me into cooperating, you've succeeded – for the time being. However, I find none of your so-called options agreeable. The only option I will accept is to go home."

"Interesting," he rubbed his chin, "You're behaving like a stereotypical American – an opinionated 'I'm the center of the universe' American. A cowboyish 'never give up'-type American. Unfortunately, I don't see a cavalry rushing over the nearest sand dune to save you." He shook his head. He wondered what it would take for her to finally submit to his wishes. He continued, "Well, judging from your big attitude and soft hands, I doubt you've done any work in your life. You'd be a useless servant." He sighed, "And, I can't see anybody around here wanting a wife like you. Guess you'll have to be a mistress. The only question is, whose?" He gazed at her intently, enjoying her discomfort. He smiled wickedly. He added, "Are you a good lover?"

"That's none of your business," she snarled, "leave me alone or the US Government will be all over you."

He smiled, "Unlike many of my country's comrades, I love a woman with spunk." He licked his lips, "Maybe I'll keep you for myself."

"Go to hell." There she swore again. It felt foreign to speak such foul language, but she endeavored to sound tough.

"Spunky with a foul mouth too!" he laughed as he grabbed her arm and pulled her close. He didn't have time for this foolishness. It wouldn't be long before they had to travel. He needed to break her or she'd never be able to make the long trip to Loran without compromising his men. The ride was normally brutal, but with an uncooperative hostage, it would be impossible. She either had to cooperate

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or she'd have to be killed. It was that simple. He pulled her closer.

His arm captured her waist. His hand clasped the hair on the back of her head and pushed her face to his. She struggled as his lips neared hers. Finally, as his mouth clamped down on hers she whimpered. A sign of fear. He could work with that. At that moment he decided to let her live – for the time being – and see what it would take to make her submit fully to his authority. With her foul mouth and superior attitude, he figured it wouldn't take much.

His mouth devoured her in a kiss that made her dizzy. His tongue explored her until she gagged. Then he released her with a flourish. She promptly spit on his face.

"I thought you were going cooperate," he laughed, licking her foamy saliva off the side of his mouth. "It seems I get to tame a shrew. I enjoy a good challenge. I've decided. You're mine – for now."

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, "You're acting like a stereotypical Horabite. Just like an animal." She wanted to claw his eyes. She wanted to scratch the smug smile off his face. He just smiled as he tossed the extra fruit and jerky into his saddlebag.

"You're a sick bastard," she hissed, "A sick, creepy, ignorant, greasy, bastard."

Anger flashed through his eyes.

He turned, seized her arm, and shoved her shoulders to the ground, straddling her waist. He squeezed her shoulders as she tried to push his face away from hers. She wasn't strong enough. With one movement he deliberately licked her lips with one long swipe. She whimpered. Zadok's men began to hoot.

As his left hand inched towards her breast she pleaded, "No, please don't. I'm sorry." She cursed herself for putting herself in an even worse situation. With tears springing into her eyes, she implored, "not here, not in front of them! I take it back, you aren't a bastard."

His eyebrows rose with surprise. She'd backed down quicker than he expected. He smiled, happy to have found a

method to make her cooperate. He shrugged, "You become agreeable quickly. Later then," he continued, lowering his lips to her ear, "Actually, I don't care to have my ass hanging out for my men to see anyway. When we finally consummate our relationship, I want to do it right. When I make love to a woman, I like to take my time. We only have about two hours before we ride again."

He smiled, then kissed her long and hard, raking his fingers through her hair and invading her mouth with his tongue. She tried to push him away but he wouldn't budge. True to his word, he took his time, leisurely probing her mouth with his tongue, pressing his body on top of hers, ignoring her groans of protest. He finished with a relish and yelled, "OK men, I'm done. Let's get some sleep, we travel in two hours." He dropped beside her. Then he pulled her close, pushing her face against his neck. She twisted until she was able to press her back against his chest. He held her tight but she didn't dare complain.

She couldn't believe the predicament she was in. Whenever she thought of his kiss she choked on his tongue. She wondered where they were going. She wondered when she'd get home again. She thought about her parents, her sisters, Larry, Warren, her dog. Tears filled her eyes and dripped onto the sand.

The air steadily cooled but the warmth from his body kept her warm. Despite all that had happened, she felt a strange sensation of being safe. She could still see him leering at her in that animal way, yet something inside her knew it was an act designed to make her afraid. She hoped her instincts were correct. If they weren't she was in for many unpleasantries.

But she couldn't help but notice how handsome he was. Her sister, Gloria, would faint if she could lay this close to someone like this Zadok-person. Under different circumstances, she could actually be attracted to him. And his strength amazed her. Even in sleep, his arms were like bands; she knew he would easily thwart any escape attempt she would make. No, she would bide her time. As soon as

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she found herself anywhere near civilization, she'd escape these barbarians.

She squirmed to see how soundly he slept. Sure enough, the instant she moved, the arms that held her tightly, tightened more. In spite of her desire to stay awake, sleep overcame her – a deep sleep that only comes after a day of strenuous activity. A sweet sleep that defies circumstances and ignores reality. A sleep she wished would go on forever.

She was awakened by someone yanking her to her feet. It was him.

"We've gotta move," he hissed, "NOW!"

Sprinting towards his horse, she stumbled, half awake behind him. The large animal waited, already saddled. He ran towards the beast, clasping her arm. She stumbled behind him, clutching the huge pants. He cursed her slow pace.

With three powerful strides, he sprinted into the air and leaped with one deft motion onto the animal. She promptly ran straight into its side. Moaning with shock, she tumbled towards the ground, but never struck the sand. Instead she dangled next to the beast while he gripped her arm.

"What the hell are you doing," he sneered, eyes darting as if looking for something he couldn't yet see.

Dazed from slamming into the horse, she attempted to regain her footing – twisting her arm, pressing against the horse, hanging onto her pants – she just couldn't do it.

"What the HELL are you DOING?!" he demanded, yanking her arm again. She moaned as pain shot through her shoulder. "We've got to move. NOW!" He clenched his teeth in frustration.

"I, uh..." Words wouldn't come.

"Get up here!"

She recovered her balance as much as she could and stared at the horse. It was tall -- too tall, and his feet were in the stirrups. She had no idea how she would get on top of such a big creature, especially with one hand holding up

huge pants and the other held hostage by her captor. She looked to Jonathan, hoping he could solve her dilemma.

Their eyes met. Sick recognition filled his face.

"Do you know how to get on a horse?" he asked, hoping she knew *something, anything* about riding.

"I have no idea. I've never ridden on one of these things before," she replied stupidly. A glimmering hope formed. "You can leave me here..."

He shook his head. "Nathan," Jonathan yelled, "get over here!"

Penny turned to see the small man with the cell phone dismount his mare and run to Jonathan and Penny.

"Get her up here," Jonathan demanded motioning to her.

Nathan nodded, laced his fingers together and squatted in front of her.

Penny stared at him. "What am I supposed to do now?"

Jonathan, already beyond impatient, sighed, "Put your foot in his hands and he'll help you up."

"Oh," she replied, but was thinking, "*what a strange way to mount a horse...*" Gingerly she placed her bare foot in his hand. Without warning he hoisted her upwards while Jonathan pulled her arm. Feeling her body start to rotate she squealed, let go of the pants and twisted, clawing towards Jonathan. But when her pants began to slide down her legs, she abruptly groped the droopy fabric to stop them from dropping any further. Meanwhile, Nathan shoved her buttocks hoping to somehow get her onto the animal. Penny squealed when she felt his hands on her buns. She twisted again and flailed her legs hoping she would somehow wind up in the saddle.

Noticing the commotion, two other men trotted over to assist. Benjamin watched the ridiculous scene chuckling. More men had just begun to participate in the melee when Nathan finally hoisted Penny into the saddle. Unfortunately, she faced the wrong way. She and Jonathan gazed into each other's face; hers flushed red with embarrassment, his

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red with anger. "Turn around, we've got to get out of here!" he glared.

"I don't know how," she stammered. Jonathan nodded to the men on the ground.

She slid off the saddle with the help of Nathan. She turned around, adjusted her pants, and then realigned her glasses. Then the men lifted her into the saddle in front of Jonathan, both facing the same direction.

"You're more trouble than you're worth," he mumbled as everyone scrambled back to their horses. Penny closed her eyes to hold back tears. When they left this oasis, she'd be farther from home. She wouldn't be able to get away from these men yet but she comforted herself with the thought that she'd keep alert for any opportunity for escape.

Penny breathed a sigh of relief when she realized the saddle they shared was not the "traditional" saddle she remembered from Saturday afternoon movies she watched as a child. At least she would be spared the indignity of sitting on the "horn". This one had none. The front of the saddle looked very much like the back. As it was, Penny sat in the front, leaning back. Zadok sat in back leaning forward, gravity pushing their bodies together as it pulled them into the middle of the saddle. With each step the horse took, she felt the full length of his body against her back. He held the reins with one hand while the other arm fixed itself permanently around her abdomen. She didn't enjoy the intimate distance they shared.

With everyone ready to travel, they set off at a gallop. The power of the animal amazed Penny. Jonathan guided the horse, kept himself balanced on the creature, all the while, holding Penny in place. "*He'll really be tired when we stop,*" she thought hopefully. With him exhausted, there would be little chance any indecent proposals when it came time to sleep.

The whole ordeal was extraordinary. She'd never been on a horse and had not experienced their flexing muscles, the intense heat, or the movement of their skin. She felt as though she could slide in almost any direction, yet

Jonathan held her in place. Without him, she certainly would never be able to stay on such a creature.

The wind whipped her cheeks and her hair blew in a frenzy of motion. She held tight as much as she could, but found herself relying on Zadok's strength to keep from falling off. The powerful muscles in his thighs continually flexed, controlling the horse in ways she couldn't begin to understand. Where he found such strength she didn't know. The horses ran for what felt like hours until she finally saw hills in the distance. The sun was beginning to rise and the men pushed their horses harder. Penny felt sorry for the beasts -- their sweat created foam on their bodies and even more froth oozed from their mouths.

She heard a chirping sound and turned to see Nathan talking intently on the cellular phone. "Multi-talented," she mused. Ride and talk on the phone. I never would have guessed..." Finally, just as night began to turn to dawn, they arrived at another oasis of trees. She had no idea where they were; sometime during the night, they'd changed directions and were now riding parallel to the hills. She felt disappointed, hoping to leave the desert. It would be easier to escape and hide in hilly country. No such luck.

Upon entering the oasis, the men dismounted their animals and Nathan darted straight to Benjamin. He spoke quickly, almost hysterically, in the strange dialect. Jonathan and Penny's horse patiently waited for them to dismount. Penny realized she had no idea how to get off this animal. Everyone else was grooming and watering their horses except Jonathan. Nathan paced, nervously waiting to speak to Zadok.

"Are you getting down?" Jonathan sounded tired. Utterly exhausted, he looked at her like he'd never met such an awful equestrian before.

"I don't know how," she replied. Looking down, it seemed like miles to the sandy ground.

Too tired to teach such an irritating imbecile how to dismount, Jonathan slid off the animal.

"Get down," he demanded.

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"How?" Seeing his impatience, she felt like staying on the beast forever.

"Give me your hand," he replied coarsely, hand outstretched.

Tentatively, she offered her hand to him. She hoped he didn't feel as angry as he looked. He grasped it, then abruptly yanked. She, completely unprepared for such a gesture, jerked forward as her body flew towards his. With arms and legs sprawling, she slammed into him, knocking him to the sand where he broke her fall. She completely knocked the wind out of him.

The men chuckled while Penny rolled off his body and brushed sand from her knees. Jonathan still lay on the ground wheezing. Nathan scampered to him and helped him stand. Penny unfolded her sore body as well. While limping away, Jonathan nodded to Benjamin and croaked, "Keep an eye on her. I've got things to do."

"What kind of "things" would he have to do here," Penny thought wryly then smiled, realizing she would be separated from him and his goons for a while. Well, as far as she was concerned, he could leave her alone forever. She watched as a hunched-over Zadok stretched his sore limbs. Nathan waved the phone in his hands. They spoke intently. Finally, Zadok grabbed the phone, dialed a number and spoke. Something was very wrong.

Penny didn't care what was going on. She hoped those barbarous men would be in trouble. Big trouble. She wanted to see every one of them in jail a long time. She strolled over to a tree and sat. Benjamin followed her.

"You must *really* be somebody," he stated.

"What do you mean?" she pulled at some weeds, noting how the sand and grass seemed to happily live together.

"Guess the Army's lookin' for you," he studied her trying to figure out this complex woman, sullen and cross one minute, calm and serene the next.

"Huh. How about that." Things were looking up. She smiled and picked at the grass some more. She was

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absolutely beautiful when she smiled. The morning sun danced in her hair, cheeks glowed rosy from the ride.

"So, who are you anyway? They're usin' helicopters and everything." Deep creases etched his forehead.

She ignored his question. "What's Zadok doing?" sarcasm tinged her voice. She finally had a handle on this situation. She knew if she waited long enough, she'd find a way to make Zadok and his men bow to her wishes. They'd surely let her go now.

"He's on the phone. Checkin' out his sources. Tryin' to find out how much trouble we're in." He shook his head.

"Hmmm. How about that?" she said again smiling. This was better than she could have imagined.

She pulled at the grass. Benjamin watched.

Finally, she saw Jonathan approaching. Any confidence she may have acquired from her conversation with Benjamin evaporated when she saw his eyes. They were a storm of anger. He marched to her and snatched her arm. She didn't even have time to stand before he dragged her away from the others.

The first thing he did was throw a rope in her face. It stung her cheek. "Here – so you can keep those stupid pants up," he blurted.

Penny glared at him, but grasped the rope, strung it through the belt-loops, then tied it tight. It felt wonderful have pants that stayed put.

Jonathan then tossed a pair of shoes by her feet. Penny stared at them.

"They're for you," he growled.

"Thank-you," Penny slipped them on, "They're a little too big," she looked up and was met with such a storm of anger that she quickly added, "but I think they'll be OK."

"Fine," he glared at her, "tell me who you are."

"What do you mean," she tried to act innocent.

"I want to know who you are and I want to know now." There was a hint of desperation in his voice.

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"I still don't know what you mean," she watched him, happy to finally see him squirm. She had to make sure she got the upper hand.

He obviously tried to control his temper, "I need to know who you are so I can figure out why they're working so hard to find you."

"I already told you, I'm an American citizen. You should have let me go when I asked you to." She began to feel a little cocky, sure that he'd want to avoid trouble enough to grant her freedom.

He breathed deep then stepped closer. "Listen," he snarled, "I'm still in charge. Nobody knows where you are. I won't hesitate to kill you if you become a liability to me." He grabbed her arm and twisted it, pulling her even closer. "Nobody knows for sure *if* you were kidnapped. If they suspect you *were* kidnapped, they still don't know *who* kidnapped you or *where* you are now." Pain shot through her arm and into her shoulder. He clenched his teeth and continued, "And if you 'happen' to die and if they ever *do* find your body, they'll still not know who took you. You are in a very dangerous situation." His nose almost touched hers as he spoke low and threatening, "Now, I'll ask you again. Who are you?"

She didn't feel cocky anymore. She sighed before she spoke. "I have no idea why the army's looking for me." She shrugged, "Guess King Jihad didn't like having his guest missing from his fortress."

Jonathan dropped her arm. "You were King Jihad's *guest?*"

She nodded, rubbing her arm.

Zadok's eyebrows knit together. Then he said, "We assumed you were a new member of his concubine. He likes strange women – and you certainly are strange." Zadok shook his head, eyes narrowing, "Who the hell are you?" he demanded, "King Jihad doesn't have guests and he certainly wouldn't take in the average American tourist."

"Look," she said as she picked at some fabric pills on her sleeve, "I'm a writer from the midwestern part of the United

States. My editor sent me here, to – er Horab, to observe the people. King Jihad offered to be my host. It's that simple."

"You're some sort of journalist" he looked sick. "The only thing more irritating than an American is an American journalist. Americans are self-centered and irritating. American journalists are all that plus nosy." His face dropped. "I don't need to have my life probed by a god damned journalist." He sighed and asked, "What's your complete name?"

"No," she corrected, "I'm not a journalist. I'm a researcher and a writer. My last name is Andrews."

"Andrews?"

"Yeah, Penny Andrews."

"Penny Andrews... Penny Andrews?" he pondered, "The name is familiar..." He studied her and continued, "but you don't look like her. And I didn't think she was a researcher."

Penny shrugged, "Well I *am* Penny Andrews, and I've assisted with a lot of research."

Penny Andrews. Penny Andrews. He studied her face, then visualized the photo on the back flap of her book jackets. The eyes. The small nose. The full mouth. Suddenly, as if a veil had been lifted, he recognized her. It was her. It was really her. Penny Andrews standing before him. He couldn't kill her. Not Penny Andrews. His entire body seemed to deflate at that moment. "Oh my God," he mumbled, "we are in *so much* trouble. Of all the people in this damn country we have to accidentally abduct Penny Andrews."

She smiled, "You've heard of me?" Perhaps this man wasn't as much a barbarian as she thought.

"Unfortunately, yes," he winced, "Now that you told me your name, I recognize you from your book photos." Shaking his head he said, "You look like a mess, but you do bear a striking resemblance to those pictures."

She decided to seize the moment, "Let me go. I want to go home. I *need* to go home. I won't tell a soul what's happened here. Just let me go."

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Suddenly a rumbling vibrated the air. Jonathan dove towards Penny and grabbed her. They both rolled under one of the many bushes that peppered the oasis. He held her tight with one hand over her mouth, the other encircling her waist. His legs held her body in place. Meanwhile the men scrambled to make a camp that looked as though it had been lived in a while. The rumbling crescendoed until Penny realized a helicopter was approaching. She struggled to escape. She knew she had to get away from him, to let the helicopter find her, but he held her tight.

The men made a quick façade of a camp complete with drying laundry and campfires. Food cooked in empty pots, men lay on the ground as if they were napping, others played cards. The helicopter roared over head, pausing to survey the camp. The men waved enthusiastically without hiding. Seemingly satisfied, the helicopter roared away.

"That was *way* too close," Jonathan mused, "we've got to cross the border."

"Are you letting me go?"

"Absolutely not," he looked distracted, without any rage. "Our first priority is to cross the border, then we'll decide what should be done with you." He continued, "We'll sleep now. We should be OK for a while since the army's already swept this area. At dusk we'll travel until we make the main camp."

Her chin quivered as she fought back tears. They crawled from beneath the bushes and brushed sand from their clothes. Jonathan strode to his saddlebag and paused before taking out his bedding. Penny Andrews. It was too much to comprehend. How could he have wound up with Penny Andrews? He turned and strolled back to the bush, laid out his blankets and sat. He motioned to Penny who reluctantly sat beside him. He wrapped his arms around her and gently pulled her to the ground. She tried to control her tears but moisture pooled in her eyes. Her body quivered.

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"It'll be OK," he sighed pulling her closer. Then he chuckled, "The first thing I'm going to teach you when we cross the border is how to ride a horse. I can't tell you how my arms ache."

"Sorry," she mumbled. So he wasn't a Horabite. They were going to cross a border, but which one? The only country that would want to abduct one of Jihad's staff members had to be Loran. They were the only country bordering Horab with a some kind of land dispute.

She wasn't as familiar with Loran culture as she was with Horab's, but she had a feeling she was about to learn more than she ever intended. She wondered how long Jonathan Zadok planned to keep her. She knew it takes a long time to learn to ride a horse. She hoped he didn't mean what he just said.

"You can't help that you don't know how to ride horses." Jonathan whispered, breaking the silence between them with a comforting tone, "I hear Americans drive automobiles wherever they go." He pulled the itchy blanket up to her shoulder.

Stomach wrenching from his blatant generalization veiled in courtesy she almost argued with his insipid logic, but she didn't feel like an argument. If she couldn't leave this place physically, she could at least leave it in her dreams. She allowed herself to fall into a deep sleep.

Chapter 4

Again, she was jerked to her feet the moment dusk kissed the horizon.

"Can't you ever wake me up without dragging me around first," she complained.

"We've gotta get moving," he mumbled as he pulled her towards the horse. "It's going to be a long ride."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute!" she yanked her arm out of his grasp and fumbled with her glasses, "I just woke up. You've gotta wait a minute." She struggled to orient herself. She'd slept too hard and had awakened too quickly. She shook her head and spoke, "I have to freshen up before we leave."

"What do you mean 'freshen up'?" he grasped her arm again and pulled.

"I've gotta go," she pleaded yanking her arm away again.

"I already told you, I'm not letting you go," he was firm as he grabbed her arm and squeezed it tight.

"I've gotta *go*." She stated firmly.

"I said 'no'."

She yanked her arm from him again and hissed, "I've got to go to the *bathroom*. We can't leave until I *go*."

"To the bathroom?" he repeated stupidly. "There are no bathrooms out here."

"I have to *use* the bathroom. I have to *go*. *Now*." Her eyes pleaded with him.

"Oh," he paused. Recognition filled his eyes as the meaning of her words made sense. He released her arm. "Oh. Sorry." He wasn't accustomed to such situations. His men usually took care of such matters privately. He nodded towards a large patch of bushes. "Hurry."

She hurried towards the area where Jonathan had motioned. She glanced behind her to make sure no one watched. They seemed busy preparing for the ride. She sighed, dreading what she had to do. She didn't like doing "this" outside. It seemed such an awkward activity for a

woman. She groaned, then fumbled with her pants. She gingerly squatted, careful to make sure none went near her feet as she formed a small river leading nowhere. After she finished she wandered down to the water and splashed her hands and face.

She didn't want to get on that horrible horse again. She knew if she did, she wouldn't see home for a long time. She ran her fingers through her tangled hair and turned towards the group of men. They chatted amongst themselves as they waited for her. Without thinking, she turned and looked the other direction. Taller and thicker bushes covered the ground just a few hundred feet beyond the pond. Perhaps she could run and hide amongst them.

Zadok and the men seemed to be in a hurry. It was already dark and it was possible they might not want to take the time to find her if she hid well enough. The Horab army would surely find her – they had helicopters. There was plenty of water here, she figured she could probably live a long time at this oasis. She glanced towards her abductors, then checked the other direction. In a split second she made her decision. She started to run.

Jonathan was tightening his saddle when he heard it.

"Holy, shit, look at her go!" Nathan gushed.

He turned just in time to see Penny running at break-neck speed towards the brush.

"Shit," Jonathan groaned as he leaped on his horse, "you stay here." The men chuckled. This was the most interesting mission they'd taken in a long time. Usually their trips across the desert filled their days with only the mundane sameness of everyday life. This woman had made this trip not only interesting but entertaining.

She darted as fast as she could towards the bushes. She ran frantically until she was certain she was far enough away from him. Then she heard it. A horse galloping. She sprinted to escape the sound. She ran until her sides ached and could no longer feel the pebbles bruising her feet. She'd lost her shoes again.

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He galloped through the bushes and easily caught up to her. Although she could run fast, how could she possibly outrun a horse? He didn't feel like running just then; his body still ached. It was much easier to follow her on horseback.

She heard the sandy clop-clop-clop of the animal trotting behind her. Enraged she forged forward. Finally, she couldn't run any more so she simply walked. By now they were well beyond the patch of bushes and open desert surrounded them. Still she heard that damned creature behind her. Insanity shook her body. All she wanted was to get away from these horrible men – of what use could she possibly be?

She wanted to go home. She wanted to feel soft carpet caress her bare feet. She wanted to smell rural smells – freshly plowed earth, the dusty scent of a wheat field. She wanted to complain about turkey odors that permeated her small town when the wind came from the north. She wanted to hug her dog and argue with Warren.

She wanted to exit this horrid land of sand and wind. She didn't want to feel him near. She didn't want to smell horses or hear his death threats. Before she could control her emotions, sobs erupted from deep within her. The tears she thought she controlled pushed themselves to the surface and escaped down her cheeks. Her shoulders quaked and her knees buckled. "Why won't you just leave me," she croaked, "All I want to do is go home." She paused and repeated, "All I want is to go home." Nothing made sense. By now she was sobbing. She collapsed in the sand.

Jonathan stopped the horse. He'd wondered how long it would take before she finally quit walking. He wanted snatch her from the sand and drag her back so they could begin traveling, but an emotion he didn't recognize forced him to wait. He gazed in wonder as the tears shook her body. He slid from the saddle and knelt beside her.

"Are you OK?" he touched her shoulder but she jerked away. She stumbled to her feet and raced away.

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He followed, leaving the horse, easily matching her pace until she abruptly stopped again. She groaned, holding her face in her hands; more tears quaking through her body.

"We've *got* to go," he touched her again. This time she clenched her hand into a fist and threw her body into a punch meant to knock him senseless. But she wasn't quick enough. He caught the hand before it reached his face.

"I hate you," she shrieked, clawing at him with the fingernails of her free hand.

Dodging what had suddenly become another weapon, he captured it, "We've got to go," he stated.

"You'll have to kill me first," she snarled, pulling away. Tears began to flow uncontrollably despite all her valiant efforts to restrain them.

"No, I won't kill you. You're too valuable right now," he squeezed her wrists.

She shrieked and began to kick. "Let me go," she yelled, "Just leave me."

Jonathan loosened his grip and pulled her close. She struggled, furious. She fought him, hit him, kicked, and even bit his arm, but he was stronger. He held her tight until her strength drained away. They sank to the ground. One-by-one, he captured each flailing limb and held it hostage preventing it from accosting him. At last, exhaustion overcame her and she lay whimpering in a near-fetal position, limp in his arms, her head resting on his shoulder.

He gazed at her exhausted body. She looked small and vulnerable; scared and frustrated. He realized she wasn't the stereotypical, demanding "American Princess" he believed her to be. He read her books for years, every one of them from cover to cover. Her prose rang in his memory as he held her. Suddenly, at that moment, she became a human being – not an anonymous author, nor a mere image gazing at him from the book jackets. She was no longer a dream in his imagination. She became human. A frightened human being. An author who wrote from her

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heart. Someone who stirred his soul deep into the night as he devoured her words.

And right now, as she quivered in his arms, her heart was breaking. He imagined himself in her situation; the fear she felt, embroiled in circumstances beyond her control. He touched a tear with this thumb. She didn't recoil. She seemed melted into his body, somehow becoming a part of him. He watched as another tear squeezed through her eyelids and another silent sob shook her body. He felt his heart break.

Somehow in that moment, as she whimpered in his arms, the prose he'd read until he emblazoned it into his memory, blossomed into images he never knew he could imagine. As their bodies melded and their spirits intertwined, she succeeded in prying open his soul. He began to struggle with emotions he didn't understand. He closed his eyes to savor the moment.

Emotions of affection and protectiveness crashed through him. As he struggled to catch his breath he felt a strange sense of softness towards this stranger. She was not "just" a woman. He sensed they shared something. Something big. He shook his head to remove the feelings but they wouldn't go away. He gazed at her, wondering what was happening. Could she feel it too?

Before he could stop himself, he rested his lips in her hair. Goosebumps erupted on his spine. Breathless, he nuzzled deeper.

He needed this woman. He needed to understand what was going on between them. With all sense gone from his mind, he kissed her head. Over and over, he buried his lips in her golden hair. He inhaled deep, hoping a part of her spirit would enter his lungs and feed every cell in his body. He squeezed her tight.

She tensed, drew in her breath and stopped crying, focusing on the moment. She would have panicked, but she didn't dare move. What was he doing? Unfortunately his actions perplexed him as much as they did her.

With his heart pounding in his throat, he felt compelled to touch her, somehow comfort her. Quivering, he stroked her hair. "You OK?"

"No," she whispered. She raised her moist eyes to meet his. They pleaded with him. "I want to go home."

"I'm sorry," he choked, thankful he could speak through the tightness in his throat. He swallowed and continued, "We've got to go, we're behind schedule." But he couldn't seem to remove his hand from her hair. He breathed deep and whispered more to himself than to her, "We need to go now."

He avoided capturing her gaze; he couldn't bear to see pain in her eyes. He pulled her closer. He knew if he were to leave her at the oasis, he sign her death warrant. There was no telling if or when the Horab army would be back.

Another question plagued him, "Why was Jihad searching for her so diligently?" He knew Jihad well enough to know that if he used his army to search for her, it wasn't to rescue her. She was in trouble. With her big opinions, she'd undoubtedly insulted him. And if Jihad found her, she'd be dead before she could say "United States Citizen," if she was lucky enough to die that quick. No. She had to stay with him. She'd be safer with him than with Jihad.

Besides, as practicality began to trickle into his mind, he realized he couldn't allow her freedom and remain a strong leader in the eyes of his men. He couldn't afford to seem weak, especially now.

He whispered. "I'm going to loosen my arms. Are you going to run?" She shook her head. He released her, stood, then pulled her to her feet. He led her towards the horse. She stood at the animal's side staring at the empty saddle. She shook her head.

"I can't get on this thing." She felt sick to her stomach. She knew with absolute certainty that if she left with him now, she wouldn't see home for a long time. Without her passport or any form of identification her chances of crossing back over any borders were next to impossible.

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"I'll help you," he squeezed her shoulder. "Put your foot there," he pointed to the stirrup.

She stood firmly in place and stared at the animal's ribs, "Please leave me here," she whispered. "The army will find me and I won't tell anyone what happened. I promise."

"I can't." He shook his head. "You've got to come with me." He tried to sound firm, but confusion still clouded his mind. He reluctantly continued, "You'll have to come voluntarily or I'll make you come involuntarily. We have to get moving." He knew if they didn't cross the border soon, the Horab army would surely find them. A tear rolled down her cheek as she raised her foot to place it in the stirrup.

He smiled, "No, not that foot, the other one. We don't want to face each other again." With her chin quivering, she raised her other foot and placed it where he pointed. "Now just straighten your leg and I'll help you over." She obliged while he grasped the other leg and swung it over the horse's back. "See?" he said, "It wasn't that hard," he clasped her knee.

She squeezed a sad smile from her lips. She was evidently making a valiant effort to cooperate but her efforts barely mattered at the moment – he was breathless again. She looked utterly stunning with her blond hair glistening in the moonlight. He struggled to control his pounding heartbeat as perspiration erupted from his forehead.

He glanced towards the men who waited for him. He heard them yell, "Hey Zadok, hurry up!" He didn't respond. Instead, he shook his head to organize his thoughts and admired her for a moment longer before vaulting onto the horse. He couldn't believe it. He was actually sitting next to Penny Andrews. He circled his arm around her waist, paused a moment to savor her closeness, then trotted back to the group. Tears pooled in her eyes as she realized she was about to begin another leg of their journey, which took her farther away from home.

It seemed like they'd ridden forever when they finally stopped at another oasis. Inky blackness made her unable

to decipher whether her eyes were open or closed. Judging from the demeanor of her fellow travelers, this stopover would mirror the last three: they would water the horses, stretch their legs, use the "facilities" and then be on their way. Benjamin always positioned himself nearby to thwart any more of escape attempts. She figured they couldn't afford any more wasted moments.

When the group prepared to leave, Benjamin offered to share his horse with Penny, but Jonathan declined. His arms ached but he savored the moments of closeness they shared in the saddle. Penny also preferred to ride with Jonathan – she remembered how Benjamin had groped her. Jonathan had been a gentleman lately. He treated her with respect. She didn't understand, but she didn't want to question it either. He could actually be nice when he wanted. As she watched him care for his horse she was struck by the tenderness he displayed. Finally the animals finished their drinking and it was time to move again.

They rode for what seemed like an eternity. Every muscle in Penny's body ached and she was sure her backside would be bloody when she finally got out of that damn saddle. Jonathan raised his hand and the whole group stopped. Everyone gathered around their horse.

"I think we crossed it," Nathan stated in the strange dialect. "When do you figure we'll get to the main camp?"

Benjamin stretched, "We've got about two more hours of darkness and three more hours to the main camp. One hour of traveling during daylight? Do we want to chance getting spotted?"

Jonathan broke in, "We'll go for the camp. I think the horses can make it. We've got to get our guest hidden away as soon as possible. If they don't find her, they'll assume she's dead and we can relax and take our time to decide what to do with her."

As quickly as they stopped, they began again. They rode hard until the sun rose. Her bruised body ached and her stomach rumbled. About the time she thought she would die, they arrived at the top of a ridge and stopped. Looking

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down, a portable city dotted the valley. Judging from the look of relief on everyone's face she figured it must be the "Main Camp."

The camp appeared to be a tent city with animals and people milling about. Dusty tents pitched close together formed narrow streets with the exception of one large tent in the center, which had an open area surrounding it. Hope rose within her. Perhaps she could find someone who would be sympathetic to her situation and help her escape. She turned to look at the men. Relief flooded their faces. Jonathan tightened his grip on her abdomen and gave the signal to proceed.

The crew moved down the hill towards the city. The sheer size surprised her. The closer they got, the larger it seemed. She tightened her body as her stomach leaped to her throat. She wished she hadn't survived the abduction. She wished she were home. She wished she were anywhere but on this hot and dusty horse. What would happen once they arrived at this "Main Camp"? Why did she sense that Jonathan was as nervous as she? Why was he suddenly treating her in a civil manner? She guessed she'd find out later, but for now, only God knew.

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Oh no! This can't be the end, can it?
Of course not.

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About the Author

B.A. Erickson writes romantic suspense with a twist. From the hot sands of the desert to the freezing plains of Minnesota, Beth is drawn to the sensual, the dangerous, the incredible promise of each new day... these are all themes in every romantic suspense she pens. Like Ashley in Reclaimed Haven, Beth is also a (hopefully) cancer survivor. That experience brought an interesting new dimension to the tales she weaves.

She lives in Central Minnesota with her husband, son, and multiple rescue animals. Her work with strays taught her that no matter how dire the circumstance, tremendous hope, love, and joy can be found in any situation.

Drop by her website and become a VIP reader (tons of fun stuff included) at <http://BAEricksonBooks.com>

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